

Personal construct psychology: The first half-century

PERSONAL CONSTRUCT PSYCHOLOGY: THE FIRST HALF-CENTURY

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Two people were highly influential in my development as a personal construct psychologist, Don Bannister and Fay Fransella. In the late 1960s Don toured British university Psychology Societies providing students with what was often their first introduction to a psychology which provided a radical alternative to what was taught on their undergraduate courses. Psychology could actually be about people rather than rats and pigeons, and not only that but people could actively make choices about their worlds rather than being passive victims of their conditioning, libidinal forces, or their biochemistry. This was particularly apparent in Don's pioneering work on schizophrenic thought disorder, on which he later collaborated with Fay, and which indicated that people with this diagnosis employ the same strategies to avoid invalidation of their construing as does anyone else, albeit more extremely (Bannister, 1960, 1962). On hearing Don talk about this work, it occurred to me that a major problem with it was that the repertory grid that he used employed supplied constructs rather than personal constructs elicited from the individuals concerned. I therefore resolved for my undergraduate dissertation to replicate Don's study using not only his original grid but one which used elicited constructs, finding that clients diagnosed as schizophrenic were differentiated from non-clients by Don's grid but not by the grid using their own personal constructs (Winter, 1971). Enthused by these results, two years later during my clinical psychology training I carried out a similar study but this time comparing the parents of clients diagnosed as schizophrenic with those of other clients, and finding again that they could be differentiated by Don's and Fay's original grid but not by a grid using elicited constructs (Winter, 1975). Furthermore, the looser the construing of the schizophrenic clients, the looser that of their parents. It was around this time that Don and Fay reaf-

firmed my passion for personal construct psychology with the publication of *Inquiring Man* (Bannister & Fransella, 1971), which for me is still the most powerful introduction to the theory. One always remembers where one was on the days of significant events – John Kennedy's assassination, Princess Diana's car crash, 9/11, etc., and I still have a strong memory of where I was when I first started reading *Inquiring Man* – on the upper deck of a bus in Newcastle in 1971. I am generally very careful with my books but my original copy of *Inquiring Man* is so well used that it now consists of loose pages held together by sellotape.

Inquiring Man was soon followed by another of Fay's publications that had a major impact on me, *Personal Change and Reconstruction* (Fransella, 1972). Not only was this the first major empirical demonstration of a link predicted by the theory between construing and a particular type of behaviour, stuttering, it also presented a therapeutic approach developed from PCP. Much of my own later work was inspired by this book. This has included the development and empirical evaluation of personal construct theoretical models and therapeutic approaches for particular clinical problems, including agoraphobia (Winter et al., 2006), deliberate self harm (Winter et al., 2007a), and psychosexual problems (Winter, 1988), as well as the development of repertory grid technique as a psychotherapy outcome measure (Winter, 2003). One of my particular concerns has been to attempt to extend the boundaries of personal construct psychology, for example by applying it to clinical problems with which its use had not previously been reported, including exploring the limits of Kelly's credulous approach by attempting to construe the construction processes of serial killers (Winter, 2007; Winter et al., 2007b).

There is no time to share with you the details of this

work, but what I would like to do is to give you a flavour of a recent review that I have carried out with Beverly Walker, from the University of Wollongong, Australia, another psychologist who was highly influenced by Fay (Walker & Winter, 2007). Some years ago – in the student bar in Wollongong – Beverly suggested to me that we write a review of developments in personal construct psychology in the half century since Kelly published his theory, and I had the crazy idea that in an attempt to obtain a wide audience for these developments we should seek to publish the paper in the *Annual Review of Psychology*, which for those of you who are unfamiliar with such things is the psychology journal which has the highest impact factor. On contacting the editor, we discovered that one does not submit papers to this journal but that instead selected authors are invited to write papers on areas identified by the editorial team. Nevertheless, despite our impertinence in approaching the editor directly, she was interested in our idea and agreed to take it to the team which would in due course consider the contents of the 2007 issue of the journal. Much to our amazement, some nine months later we heard that the journal wished to commission our paper, and we were then faced with the daunting task of reviewing 50 years of developments in personal construct psychology. As an aid to prioritising work to review from the thousands of publications during this time, we asked several leading personal construct psychologists to list five major developments over this period. 18 generously gave of their time to send responses.

We divided our review into the areas of theory, methods, and applications. In regard to theory, some of the post-1955 elaborations of PCP were by Kelly himself, largely in the selection of his papers edited by Brendan Maher (1969). However, the theoretical development most frequently cited by the personal construct psychologists we surveyed was the doctoral dissertation of Kelly's student, Dennis Hinkle (1965), with its demonstration that constructs with the most implications are the most resistant to change. Other theoretical elaborations have concerned self-construing, for example Miller Mair's (1977) notion of a community of selves; the development of personal construct psychology as a social psychology, in which Harry Procter's family construct psychology (1981) has been particularly influential; the extension by Mildred McCoy (1977)

of Kelly's personal construct classification of emotions; the elaboration of links with other theoretical positions, particularly cognitive approaches, humanistic psychology, and constructivism; and research testing out aspects of the theory, in which we have singled out studies (Millis & Neimeyer, 1991; Riemann, 1990) that support the notion that constructs are bipolar, although not necessarily strictly dichotomous.

Developments in personal construct assessment techniques have also been extensive, including the bewildering variety of methods of repertory grid technique and its analysis that have been devised over the last 50 years, most of which are reviewed in another of Fay's major publications, the *Manual for Repertory Grid Technique*, co-authored with Richard Bell and Don Bannister (Fransella, Bell & Bannister, 2004). However, developments in assessment methods extend beyond grids, including laddering and pyramiding for the tracing of superordinate and subordinate implications of constructs (Hinkle, 1965; Landfield, 1971); Finn Tschudi's (1977) ABC technique for the exploration of impediments to movement; variations on the self-characterisation technique, including the conversion of written texts into grids (Feixas & Villegas, 1991); interview procedures; methods for the content analysis of constructs (Feixas, Geldschläger & Neimeyer, 2002; Landfield, 1971); questionnaire measures of personal construct processes (Chambers & O'Day, 1984; Theodoulou, 1996); and visual techniques, including the use of psychophotography (Hanieh & Walker, 2007).

Developments in the application of the theory have primarily been in the clinical, educational, and organisational settings but are by no means limited to these settings. In the clinical sphere, there has been elaboration of Kelly's view of disorder and the derivation of personal construct models of various clinical problems (Winter, 1992). There have also been numerous repertory grid studies of psychotherapy, the development of different approaches to personal construct psychotherapy (Winter & Viney, 2005), including methods developed for use with particular disorders, and the gradual amassing of an evidence base for personal construct psychotherapy. While the notion of an evidence base is anathema for some personal construct theorists, in my view it is crucial for the survival of our therapeutic approach in the current climate, and I want to mention

briefly some of the work in which I have been involved that I think is important in this regard. Firstly, in a study with Sue Watson (Winter & Watson, 1999), we found the treatment process in personal construct psychotherapy to be significantly different to that in rationalist cognitive therapy by applying therapy process scales to transcripts of sessions of the two types of therapy and by giving the transcripts to Fay Fransella and to a leading cognitive therapist, Windy Dryden, who were asked blindly to identify which were examples of which type of therapy. They were able to do this with a very high level of accuracy – although I have to say that Windy did wrongly classify a transcript of one of my sessions as cognitive therapy, but wrote on it ‘not very good cognitive therapy’. I think I can live with this better than being called a good cognitive therapist! Another piece of work in which I have been involved, together with Chris Metcalfe and Linda Viney, has been a meta-analysis of outcome studies of personal construct psychotherapy (Metcalfe, Winter & Viney, 2007; Viney, Metcalfe & Winter, 2005). For those of you who are not familiar with meta-analysis, it is a way of statistically aggregating the findings of a number of studies, and it has allowed us to provide strong evidence that personal construct psychotherapy is considerably more effective than no treatment and at least as effective as other forms of therapy, including those recommended in such sources as the NICE guidelines, with which those of you who work in the clinical field in the UK are likely to be very familiar (for those who are not familiar with NICE, it stands for the National Institute of Clinical Excellence). One of my main aims is to make the NICE guidelines nicer by the inclusion in them of personal construct psychotherapy!

Moving on to applications in the educational field, personal construct psychology has been elaborated as a psychology of personal growth and developed as an educational psychology. Sadly, three of the major figures involved in this work, Phil Salmon, Jim Mancuso, and Tom Ravenette (Mancuso, 2003; Ravenette, 1999; Salmon, 1970), all died last year. There has also been a considerable amount of work on the exploration of meaning in the learning process, much of this by Maureen Pope and Pam Denicolo (Pope & Denicolo, 2001). In the organisational setting, personal construct theorists have been concerned to work with individuals in the

organisation, for example by coaching, counselling, and vocational guidance; and with the organisation itself, which can be considered to have a corporate construct system that it is important to explore in situations of team building and conflict resolution. Leading lights in this work, in addition to Fay herself, have been Sean Brophy, Helen Jones, Devi Jankowicz, and Mary Frances (Brophy, Fransella, & Reed, 2003; Frances, 1999; Fransella, Jones, & Watson, 1988; Jankowicz, 1990). Amongst the numerous other areas of application of personal construct psychology, some of which we shall hear about from other speakers, are the arts, sport, politics, and forensic psychology (e.g. Fransella, 2003).

Kelly (1955/1991) himself set out a list of design specifications for a psychological theory, and it is therefore possible to evaluate personal construct psychology reflexively against these criteria. There is no time to consider this evaluation in detail but suffice it to say that, as indicated in Figure 1, the theory is holding up very well except in one area, its ultimate expendability. I suspect, though, that Fay might say that this is likely to occur by it eventually being subsumed by constructivism, and I consider that this is an area that merits further exploration. I would suggest that other profitable future directions are further research investigation of aspects of Kelly’s theory, such as his notion of choice; the development of methods of assessment of construct processes; further elaboration of the personal construct psychology view of disorder; and development of the evidence base for the range of applications of personal construct psychology.

In the time available today I have been able to provide you with no more than a flavour of elaborations of personal construct psychology over the years but we are privileged to have with us experts in most of the fields that I have mentioned, who I am sure will give you a more substantial taste of developments in the areas concerned.

<i>Appropriateness of focus and range of convenience</i>	
Focus on 'psychological reconstruction of life' demonstrated in elaborations of personal construct psychotherapy	
Wide range of convenience demonstrated in other applications	
<i>Fertility</i>	
Generation of new methods, research programmes, and applications	
<i>Production of testable hypotheses</i>	
Numerous hypotheses have been developed and tested.	
<i>Validity</i>	
Several of these hypotheses have received research support.	
<i>Generality</i>	
Abstractness of theory's concepts has given generality extending beyond clinical realm and original historical context.	
<i>Amenability to operational definition</i>	
PCP concepts have been operationally defined, often using assessment methods developed from the theory.	
<i>Modifiability and ultimate expendability</i>	
Little or no modification of the theory, perhaps indicating its viability, but possible expendability by integration with other approaches.	
<i>Avoidance of problems due to assumptions of mental energy</i>	
Lack of concepts of mental energy has not hampered explanatory power.	
<i>Ability to account for people's choices</i>	
Empirical support for theory's view of choice, which enables understanding of choices that may seem self-defeating or destructive from other perspectives.	
<i>Recognition of individuality</i>	
Plentiful idiographic applications of the theory are complemented by nomothetic applications, e.g. investigations of the construing of particular groups.	

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Figure 1. A reflexive evaluation of personal construct psychology

- struct theory, (pp. 125-49). London; Academic Press.
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